

More, Faster, Better

The Path to Resource Driven and Locally Led Conservation -- The 21st Century NRCS

Remarks by Bruce I. Knight, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service, at the 58th Annual Meeting of the National Association of Conservation Districts

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Thank you, Gary (Mast). Good morning everyone. It is a pleasure to be here with you today. The topic listed in the program for my talk today is a mouthful: "The Path to Resource Driven and Locally Led Conservation: The 21st Century NRCS." It is a complicated title, but it includes some very important concepts.

Resource-Driven Conservation

The first important concept is resource driven conservation.

I have mentioned many times to State Conservation District meetings, regional NACD Meetings, and meetings of other conservation partners and producer organizations that conservation must be resource driven, that we all have a tendency to think in terms of programs at the expense of resources, that we too often neglect the broad basics of conservation planning in favor of a narrow focus on program implementation. When what we really need is to use programs as part of a portfolio approach to conservation, an approach that addresses each producer's conservation goals in their entirety, an approach that crosses fence lines, county lines and stateliness and addresses resource concerns over entire watersheds.

Secretary Veneman supports this portfolio approach and included it in the Department's Food and Agriculture Policy Document. The farm bill supports the portfolio approach by creating the Conservation Security Program – a program that recognizes and rewards producers who undertake a resource-driven approach to conservation on their land.

So resource driven conservation is an important concept.

Locally Led Conservation

The second important concept of today's theme is locally led conservation.

The fact that we are here this week for the 58th annual meeting of NACD is an indication of how long the concept of locally led conservation has been important. The 2002 farm bill regulations recognize the importance of local leadership in conservation by formalizing the role of local leadership for the first time ever in a regulation. The rule for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program recognizes the importance of local leadership by including State priorities as well as national priorities. And EQIP now represents an investment in conservation of well over \$800 million this year alone.

So, locally led conservation is an important concept.

The 21st Century NRCS

The third important concept in today's theme is the 21st Century NRCS.

You know, President Bush signed the 2002 farm bill the same month that I became chief of NRCS. So, I have been working with NACD groups and others on the farm bill for more than a year and a half now. From the beginning, it became apparent, I have stressed that the old ways of doing business – both in NRCS and in partner organizations, the ways of doing business that worked in the lean times for conservation in the 1980s and 1990s – would not get the job done under the new farm bill.

America is making too big an investment in conservation for the old ways to accommodate. The Federal investment has increased by more than \$17 billion over a 10-year period. Beyond that, America's farmers and ranchers want our help to invest even more in conservation than the Federal budget can provide.

To get all this conservation done, we need more partners, more technical expertise, more sources of funding, and greater cooperation among everyone involved. I often speak of the NRCS as becoming more of a catalyst or enabler of conservation in the years to come.

So, the concept in today's theme of the 21st Century NRCS is also an important concept.

But, there is a simpler way of looking at what resource-driven conservation, locally led conservation, and the 21st Century NRCS mean for the future of conservation on America's working lands – in three words – “more, faster, better.” All of us – NRCS, NACD, the conservation districts, district employees, and all the conservation partners – have a lot more to do. To get it done, we have to be able to do it faster. And, to produce the most high-quality conservation, we must do everything better.

Departure of Ernie Shea

I will come back to those concepts in a minute. But first, I want to mention a topic that is on everyone's mind this week – the departure of a gentleman who has provided operational leadership for NACD for many years, Ernie Shea.

Long before I became Chief, Ernie was leading the effort to spread the news about the farm bill through the agriculture and conservation communities. He made many valuable contributions to keeping NACD and NRCS in step through the farm bill implementation process. As Chief, I have valued Ernie's support, council and guidance in such efforts as the Partnership Diversity Summit and the Partnership Marketing effort, two initiatives that have the potential for bringing more farmers and ranchers into the conservation movement.

It was mentioned many times this week, but it warrants repeating, that Ernie's hard work at NACD has helped create a farm bill that provides unprecedented support for conservation on working lands, has helped make NACD a more visible and recognized entity in the conservation policy arena, and has helped build support in the Administration and the Congress for an effective, well funded national conservation program.

I know Ernie will continue to play an important role in conservation, wherever the future takes him.

I also want to congratulate and welcome Krysta Harden as NACD's new CEO. Krysta, I look forward to working with you, as NRCS, NACD, and all the conservation partners continue to work to make the Next Golden Age of Conservation a reality.

Gary, Billy, Tim, Marc, members of the executive committee, signing up Krysta is a brilliant move. I've known Krysta for years. As Deputy Secretary Moseley said her commitment to conservation is unparalleled, and I know that her Congressional staff experience and her experience with the American Soybean Association will be valuable assets to NACD and the conservation partnership.

It is no accident that Krysta is known around Washington, DC, as the dean of farm conservation lobbyists an informal title that will be augmented by her joining the NACD team. Krysta, welcome to the family.

2003 Accomplishments

Let me return now to the world of more, faster, better conservation. In case you haven't noticed, that world is already here both at NRCS and in NACD and the districts.

Is there anyone here who wasn't busy last year? 2003 was a year of great accomplishments for NRCS, the districts and all of the partnership. Prior to today's program, we were showing some slides depicting the good work done by conservation districts, USDA – NRCS, Forest Service and

FSA – around the country.

I believe we have a slide from every state, as well as the Caribbean Basin and the Pacific Basin. I do want to say that the slides show the importance of resource-based conservation, the importance of local leadership, and how much things are changing as we continue into the 21st Century. They clearly show that the actual work of conservation is done locally, on the ground, one farm, one ranch, at a time.

And every now and then, someone in a national leadership position shows up to lend a hand. The slides include appearances by President Bush, signing the 2002 farm bill and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. We also have a picture of NACD President Gary Mast and Chief Executive Officer Ernie Shea in the field. And NACD presidents past and present with President Bush and Secretary Veneman. You probably know that former Chief Pearlie Reed retired this year after a long and successful career. We have a picture of Chief Reed and Secretary Veneman in Wisconsin celebrating Earth Day a couple of years ago.

All credit for this good conservation work must also be shared with FSA. We also have pictures of Secretary Veneman at CREP events in New York and Kentucky, along with a picture of Deputy Secretary Moseley making a Hardwood Forest announcement in Mississippi. There's even a picture of NACD board member Billy Wilson giving an interview at a farm bill event and a picture of Under Secretary Mark Rey at an Earth Day event in Colorado.

Conservation also has its emotional and patriotic moments, as when Deputy Under Secretary Mack Gray attended an event in Massachusetts for a Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program project involving land set aside by Captain John Ogonowski, one of the commercial airline pilots who died in the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

Two things these slides show quite clearly 1) is that the day-to-day work of conservation is local. 2) the Department of Agriculture is at its best when it enables local action. And these local acts of leadership add up.

Last year, NRCS and the partners had many accomplishments: Providing conservation technical assistance, completing RMS plans on more than 17 million acres, developing and applying more than 8,000 comprehensive nutrient management plans, serving nearly 3.8 million customers around the country, completing or updating soil survey mapping on 22.5 million acres. For the second year in a row, the Earth Team volunteers contributed more than a million hours of their time.

Other accomplishments included reaching out to be sure every farmer and rancher knew about farm bill programs and had an opportunity to participate, developing and meshing National and local priorities for conservation programs, writing program rules based on thousands of comments from our conservation partners, and getting the Technical Service Provider process up and running.

I want to thank the districts for your role in these accomplishments and for your active participation in the TSP process. Last year, nearly \$9-1/2 million of \$23 million in TSP funds went to districts. This represents capacity above and beyond our normal relationships and work.

All of these accomplishments add up to more, faster, better.

I have noticed in my travels around the country that morale is up in conservation districts and in NACD offices because of all this activity. People are taking old conservation plans out of file drawers where they have been sitting for years and implementing them. There are challenges, frustrations, and pressures, but nothing beats the feeling of having a mission to accomplish and the tools to accomplish it. And the farm bill is providing the tools we need to get exciting work done everywhere.

2004 Activities

The world of more, faster, better will continue into 2004.

The administration has made 30 percent more money available this year for financial assistance than last year to fund farm bill conservation programs. That should keep us all busy. In addition, we will have the collective challenge of implementing the Conservation Security Program. The challenges will be to get the work done, keep quality high, and report accomplishments fully.

In 2003, NRCS spent a lot of time and effort streamlining our own operations, becoming leaner and more efficient in delivering our core work. We updated nearly 70 standards. We got the electronic Field Office Technical Guide up and running. We streamlined program delivery, squeezing out costs without compromising quality. We got TSP up and running. We saved dollars that went to districts to do more work. We created \$38 million, working closely with FSA, in CRP program savings that resulted in additional allocations to EQIP, WHIP, GRP and WRP. Both at NRCS and in the conservation districts, our organizations grew: NRCS has increased by about 500 employees, and some districts now have more staff than NRCS does in the field.

In 2004, we will continue working on many fronts. We will continue streamlining and getting more efficient in working with our partners as well. We are holding public forums around the country to get comments on the proposed rule for the Conservation Security Program. Then we will write the final rule and begin implementing the program. We will continue updating standards. We are working on a set of wildlife standards, and we have a contract with NACD to assist us with updating other standards.

If NACD and the districts are to successfully handle the workloads of 2004 and beyond, we must make use of the latest technologies. For example, we are creating an on-line workbook for landowners to use as a self-assessment to determine their own qualification for CSP. Another example is the ProTracts system for keeping track of the progress on farm bill program contracts.

Technology will be so important to enabling the success of conservation in the future, that NRCS has brought a science and technology display to this meeting as our only exhibit.

Today, I'm pleased to mention two important advancements NRCS is making on diversity. First, a diversity award that we will be ready next year at this meeting to recognize the district that does the most on this issue. And second, we are announcing today the creation of two minority scholarships for 2004 – one for universities with high numbers of Asian, Pacific Islander students, and the second will focus on the 1994 Tribal land grant colleges. This will round out our scholarship programs with the 1890 Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the scholarships offered to Hispanic universities and colleges. People are our most important assets.

Conclusion

Since we are here in this island paradise, I want to close my remarks by using an example of a natural resource-driven, locally led conservation effort specific to Hawaii and similar areas – and that is our work with respect to land-based pollution threats to coral reefs.

NRCS worked with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and they agreed to add a new programmatic theme to their 2004 Conservation on Private Lands matching grant program, focused on improving land use practices on agricultural land upstream from coral reef ecosystems.

NRCS is providing \$3 million for these grants, which will fund innovative conservation projects on private land to improve water quality in watersheds that outlet to coral reef habitats. A special priority will be given to projects involving limited resource farmers that reduce land-based impacts on coral reefs.

The overall coral reef effort is a good example of what it means to take a natural resource based-approach to conservation and to achieve conservation through a locally led process. Add to these concepts a sense of urgency for getting conservation done, and we have the framework for conservation in the 21st Century – doing more, faster, better.

Working together in this way is the key to producing the Next Golden Age of Conservation.

Thank you.